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Colby Says Reds Often Opened Mail Before CIA

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WASHINGTON—The head of the Central Intelligence Agency has told Congressmen that many letters opened by the CIA actually had been opened surreptitiously already—by Communist agents in their own countries.

In secret testimony providing new details on the CIA's 20-year mail-opening project, Director William E. Colby also said that the agency's mail surveillance was not limited to the Soviet Union and China, the two countries he had previously mentioned.

He said mail from North Vietnam and Cuba and other Latin American countries also was opened.

His disclosures were contained in a 66-page transcript of closed-door testimony given last week to a House postal affairs subcommittee headed by Rep. Charles H. Wilson (D-Calif.). Transcripts were distributed to subcommittee members Wednesday and a copy was obtained by The Times.

Colby said agents applied chemicals to many foreign letters to determine if the writers had sent secret, hard-to-detect messages. In the process, the CIA discovered that other chemicals had been used—signs that the letters had been studied before.

"Many of the letters opened by CIA had been opened before, presumably in the Communist countries of origin," he testified.

Colby added Miami to the list of cities where the CIA once had intercepted mail. He also provided figures for the first time on mail between the United States and mainland China that was examined in San Francisco. The agency photographed 13,000 envelopes during 1970 and 1971 and opened a smaller number of letters there, he said.

The mail intercept program, which the CIA abandoned in 1973, principally took place in a restricted building

at New York's Kennedy International Airport.

Colby testified that a veteran postal worker who carried mail sacks into a room where CIA agents worked was paid a \$500 Christmas bonus by the CIA for six successive years.

"This was an improper act by the agency," Colby testified. He added, however, that the postal employee—identified as Peter McAuley, now retired—"was never told that CIA actually opened the mail."

"Because of his diligent service and support to the project, the agency since 1967 gave him a \$500 Christmas bonus totaling \$3,000," Colby said.

The Rockefeller commission, in its report on CIA activities last month, listed four cities where the CIA had once intercepted mail for intelligence purposes without legal authority. They were New York, San Francisco, New Orleans and Honolulu.

But Colby told Wilson's subcommittee that the CIA also examined mail between the United States and Cuba that was delayed in Miami from April 24 to 28, 1961. That was shortly after the CIA-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion had ended in disaster.

"The mail was made available by the Miami postal inspector who transported the mail sacks from the airport to the downtown Miami post office annex," Colby said.

He said 140 items were photographed, including envelopes and letters opened by a CIA officer.

Colby said that in some respects the vast mail surveillance program, which he termed "improper," expanded beyond the supervision of CIA of-

ficials.

Discussing the program, which focused on mail arriving from mainland China, Colby noted that a bag of outgoing U.S. mail also had been opened. Wilson asked him why.

"I suspect it was just that it was there and they decided to look at it," Colby replied. "There is a bureaucratic momentum that grows on these things, and I think that is where some of our trouble comes from."

As part of the New York-based operation, Colby said, the CIA "examined some mail between North Vietnam and the U.S. and other mail which flowed through the Soviet Union to the U.S."

Aside from Cuba, he said, the agency had opened mail "dealing with Latin America and various countries there." But he did not elaborate on this aspect, saying that mail surveil-

lance had mainly involved the Soviet Union and China.

Colby said there was no record that any President knew about the mail openings, although three postmasters general were briefed on it over a 20-year period.

Pledging that illegal mail-openings would never occur again, Colby told the congressmen: "We are resolved that we are going to run an American intelligence service, which means one pursuant to American laws."

At the same time he sought to explain why such a program had developed in 1954.

"I think again you have to look at the difference in the times, quite frankly," he said.

"The times of challenge, the times of 'Go out and do the job and meet

the threat' and so forth were very intense at that time. And with that kind of pressure there were things (that) happened that now quite apparently were improper.

Parts of the transcript had been deleted by the CIA to protect sensitive material. But Rep. William M. Brodhead (D-Mich.) said at one point:

"Certainly I must confess, Mr. Colby, I haven't heard anything today (that) would be harmful to anyone if the world knew of it."